Dalit Theology: Methodological Issues in a Contextual Theology of Liberation

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Introduction

The very word Dalit refers to a changing context of caste victims. The starting point for the Dalit theology is the discrimination that the untouchables or the outcastes are subjected to and the determination to free themselves from every form of oppression and subjugation.[1] Kambalapalli in Karnataka and Khairlanji in Maharashtra have recently witnessed events of unabated atrocities against Dalits. The phenomenon of increasing hate against Dalits attributes the protest against stratified castes, increasing assertiveness of the traditional oppressed communities, and the new forms of atrocities committed on Dalits. I propose to share with you a few of my concerns about the recent development in the changing situations of Dalit struggles and resistance which are the indicators for the emerging areas of Dalit studies. In this paper an attempt is made to indicate some of the problem areas which forces researchers and theologians to engage in the study of and involvement in Dalit life.

I. Dalit Context and Dalit Theology

Dalit context is not static but a revolutionary context in which Dalits by and large are determined to fight caste evils which is more than two thousand years

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old. The word Dalit refers to people who participate in a process where there is an ongoing change. Broadly speaking the word Dalit means split, broken, crushed and marginalized. Thus the source for Dalit theology is the historical consciousness of the Dalits who suffered social shame and poverty throughout the Indian history. Dalit theology of liberation includes Dalit experience, action and reflection towards a total liberation of Dalits from social slavery. It is also an act of exploring a new spirituality for Dalit liberation. In all its form, Dalit action is very much a struggle against caste forces which denied life in its fullness in the Indian society. Dalitness is the only source for Dalit theology. Dalit theology therefore is a protest voice in their faith to transform hopeless situation to hopeful future. Dalit voices are prophetic voices in the midst of caste and Brahminic oppression to move towards a casteless and a classless society.

Since 1975 I have been a Dalit activist and a student of Dalit literature. From 1980 I began to think seriously as a Dalit Christian for Dalit liberation. Christian Dalit consciousness for liberation came to me as *praxis* (action and reflection) in three stages. **Educating** myself and Dalit colleagues, with the experience of the past, like reading Ambedkar's work, as well as studying literature and scriptures which are rich in ideology and philosophies formed the first stage. In the second stage, **agitating** against the structure which is socially and economically oppressive, and participating in agitations, *dharnas* advocating and facilitating Dalits to participate in the act of demanding their basic rights. And in the third stage, **organizing** myself along with other Dalit brothers and sisters towards unity and solidarity of the Dalits and suffering castes to overcome and defeat Brahminic forces which are violent and barbaric.

After Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's *Parinirvana,* the *Ratha* of Dalit struggles was drawn further by a new generation of Dalit activists, intellectuals, academicians, Dalit religious leaders and theologians. In fact a new sense of self-respect marked the Dalits and the old myths which legitimized their degradation was discarded. With these developments, the Dalits now not only question the varna system and the ideology underlying it, but consider their movement as a struggle for equality.[2]

The present Dalit liberation movements can be classified into secular, political, rationalist, Marxian, religious conversions and theological movements. All these streams of struggles vary in their frequency and intensity in addressing issues

of Dalits according to their historical consciousness of oppression. Their movements also depend on the discernment of the ideologies and spiritualities of resistance they have derived from the Dalit struggle for liberation.

Dalit struggles and ideologies, philosophies and spiritualities of the past have influenced many social disciplines. Dalit consciousness and resistance to *manuvada* and Brahminic hegemony have raised vital ethical and moral questions to the socio-economic, political and religious structures and institutions which subscribe to caste evils openly or subtly.

In the area of Dalit research and studies, Dalit life and world view was constructed between contemporary understanding and experience of the Dalits and Dalit scholars. In a similar way, Dalit Christian's theological studies, research experience, pastoral ministry and related Christian disciplines are also the responses and reflections of the Dalits and Christians in their obedience to their faith. Dalit theologians, students and researchers draw their experience from their community's consciousness of shame and crises, with hopes for emancipation. Dalit studies and researches basic aim at this stage is to appropriate Dalit spirituality through Christian tradition to the doctrinal, scriptural and historical experience of the Christian communities in India and to work for the solidarity of all oppressed castes, and to combat caste, feudal hegemony and to annihilate the rule of dominant caste and class.

However, all the above said interplays of Dalit and Christian's Dalit experiences or *anubhava* are focused on contextualized suffering, resistance and liberation attempts of the Dalits. These experiences are, from time to time recognized, recorded and tested in the light of tradition and theology and are systematically studied and extended to other disciplines such as pastoral ministry, liturgy, women studies, communication and biblical studies. Re-reading the Bible from Dalit perspective is enriching not only Dalit Christians but also Dalits who adhere to other world religions in the cause of Dalit hermeneutics and Dalit solidarity. Dalit theology, ideology and the subjects related to Dalit studies and research pose a challenge to theologians and researchers about the magnitude of the Dalit problems, like its problem of particularity and locality as well as to its all-encompassing spirit in its emphasis on liberation and emancipation.

II. Dalit Theology as a Contextual Theology

Dalit theology emerges from Dalitness which is the very essence and substance of Dalits. Historically their oppression was sanctioned through the Caste system and *Manudhramashatra*. The overall oppression suffered by the Dalits in different stages can be listed as follows: firstly, **social boycott** was imposed on the vanquished indigenous people by the *Aryans* over long periods of time. It was systematically imposed locally, irrespective of geographical areas and religions in India. As a result this subjugation process continues even to this day. Secondly, social boycotts were followed by, caste **oppression** of Dalits, which was systematified practiced in water-tight compartments with each caste and subcaste stratified thus in society. To endorse caste, details of oppressions were laid down in literal and in oral form by the dominant castes. Thirdly, oppression endorsed **abject poverty** which meant denial of basic needs of Dalits. Dalits were thus disowned by the uppercaste communities.

However, untouchability and religious sanctions of pollution were imposed on Dalits to disown their social responsibility for them although rules were laid down to amass wealth through Dalit labour. And finally, Dalits and working castes in the caste society suffered **social shame and stigma** in the form of humiliation, dilemma, pain and pathos. Dalit theology (theologies) thus can never be non-liberative theology. Dalit theology is both liberative as well as contextual in its character. It is liberative for the simple reason that a large number of oppressed caste, OBCs culturally waged war against dominant castes and class seeking liberation though there were always class contradictions and cultural tensions between caste oppressors and working castes. Dalit theology thus in its wider perspective needs to understand the class and social dimension of the oppression involved in caste relations. Oppression varies from caste to caste but the nature of the caste – sub caste oppression and experience is a perceived reality of social context which resulted in **social boycott, caste oppression, poverty and social shame.** Therefore these elements of oppression form the flesh, nerves, skin and life of Dalits constituting Dalitness.

Dalit discourse can be holistic, pragmatic, praxis-oriented and liberative only when with the discrimination that the Dalits are subjected to, the various attempts made by the Dalits for their liberation and emancipation are also taken together.[3] Dalit theologians, activists and scholars are those who have the socio-cultural

understanding and biblical theological expertise, who live and work among oppressed Dalit communities which are divided under caste and subcaste prejudice and shame in Indian society. Dalit theologians are also those who facilitate the Dalit liberation process through their research methods. But they must always remember that their own caste context is socially, historically and culturally not different from the overall context of the Dalits. In the light of the Dalit context, Dalit theology reveals the contextual realities of caste victims in each area, religion, time and the place of oppression. Dalit Theology is contextual for its faith response to act, reflect and witness the act about God. It is contextual to witness and challenge caste, *Karma* Brahmanism feudalism, patriarchy imposed on Dalits. Dalit theologians, students and researchers in one way or the other have been identifying with some caste and subcaste. He or she not only represents Dalit consciousness of oppression but also will have the subcaste consciousness which is a particular subcaste conscious and experience of the social shame and poverty and deprivation.

First and foremost, Dalit theology is unique within its own caste context. It is unique because it is concerned with those victims in a culture and context where there are approximately ten thousand castes and sub castes stratified in each *varna* and non-*varna*, touchable and untouchable castes. According to recent understanding of castes, each *varna* and caste is a nation by itself. Caste India is therefore a nation within nations. And Dalit theology is the theology of liberation of those who are the worst victims of caste discrimination and untouchability. Dalit theology in its own way is unique because within untouchable castes, castes are again stratified. In each Hindu caste structure, Dalit theology speaks of God-man experience from each caste-subcaste experience from their oppressed conditions and social shame. Pain, pathos and experiences of exploitation can be divided and derived from such caste and subcaste of the Dalit.

Dalit theology cannot be done by applying any theology. As a contextual theology, it is unique in the form of others such as Black, Minjung, Feminist, Burakumin and aboriginal theology. Though a few similarities occur among Minjung, Burakumin and Black theology in terms of racial and caste features particularly with Minjung and Burakumin, there is a basic difference from the chronic untouchability suffered by the Dalit in the Indian caste context. A genuine search for Dalit theology is to be made in the context of caste exploitation of

each caste, sub-caste, untouchable caste and communities. Hence, the scope of Dalit theology is enormous, wide and inexhaustible. Therefore it should not be limited to any ethnic theologies. If theologizing in Dalit context takes place within each caste, subcaste context in India, it results in Dalit theologies of each caste and subcaste group of oppressed Dalit communities. Each caste and subcaste victims and their experience of liberation, resistance tactics, struggles to articulate their God experience can be worked out, witnessed, recorded and systematized as Dalit theology of struggle and liberation till caste and untouchability is eliminated from the Indian context for a new casteless society.

In recent times a large interest among Dalit scholars is seen in the area of Dalit studies particularly with those castes and sub castes which are unseen, unreachable unapproachable communities as classified by Dr. Ambedkar, which never came under the socio, economic and political provisions of the Government. The study also revealed the fact that these communities were even kept away from untouchable, Dalit communities (*Sachar* Commission and *Ranganathmishra* Commission Reports and recommendations). The study revealed the details of the organic link which was delinked in the economic relations of the mainline society which still has some links with OBC castes contributing to the economic growth of the Upper caste Hindu society.

Study is also in progress that a clear cut folk link is seen from the organized and unorganized castes and sub castes which still remain as relics of caste and subcaste marginalization of the upper varnas in rural societies. Communities like *Koraga, Koracha* and *Hanadi hasanas* are some of the castes and sub castes used for specific purpose of menial jobs and imposed with heavy restrictions of untouchability and caste punishments through restraining the economic benefits in the agrarian society.

III. Dalit Context and Dalit Religions

In the beginning, Dalit theology made a good head way by sharing the experiences of Dalit Christians from particular Dalit castes and subcaste from different regions of India. Early Dalit theologians represented their caste oppressions from their own Christian and non Christian memories from their own biblical reflections. Dalit Christians and non Dalit Christians also contributed immensely to this process. But there was always a process of limiting the flood of Dalit experience as it was shared through the stories of victims in the form of

social biography methods by Dalits as a way out of its methodological problems. To be more specific, Dalit Christians also shared their past from the perspective of conversion where the experiences of oppression prevailed prior to conversion and the efforts of missionaries and denominations to release them from caste oppression.

Dalit theology as a faith response of the Dalit, in particular context in their own way contributed to the Dalit folklore to their own context. To further enrich Dalit theology, a careful study of existing tradition of Dalit festivals, understanding of the sacraments and the linkages established between Dalit and non Dalit communities need to be studied.

Hence, Dalit theology is communitarian in its method. In the context of Dalit theology, each community, denomination of Christian and each emerging context of converting people to Buddhism, Islam and Christianity and people's response to such new context becomes a unique situation to Dalit theology. What is common to Dalit theology in all castes, sub castes, region, religion, denomination and emerging Dalit situation is the overall heinous social shame suffered due to the past dirty, dangerous and difficult oppression, poverty and atrocities suffered by the Dalit communities. A parallel can be drawn from the problems faced, surviving strategies adopted by the Dalits which is similar to the victims recorded in different scriptures. An element of social shame through untouchability, social and cultural hostility followed by physical and psychological violence faced by the Dalits, becomes crucial for Dalit response as the faithful community.

First, Dalit theology is unique and different from other contextual theologies since each Dalit caste and subcaste of the subaltern working castes are exploited, and as communities seeking to emancipate from caste exploitation. With different caste context and equations of caste exploitation, Dalit theology thus needs different analysis for each caste and look for different hopes and aspirations of the castes. To be very specific, Dalit theology in its substance is more a grassroot theology to construct liberation motives. Dalit theology is more concerned about the intricacies of the old pattern of life and the socio economic engagement such as dissent as well as the situations that gave rise to oppressions of Dalits. In this process, Ambedkar's exemplary life-model will be of some help where he consistently argued that we should abolish the idea of Dalithood being careful not to obliterate in the process the creative cultures produced by Dalits.[4]

Secondly, along with contextual character of the victims and oppressors, a careful and contextual reading and discernments of biblical, theological traditions, worship and church life come from each context of the people. Analysis, discernment and reflection of these will clarify the understanding of the contextual issues in a contemporary situation.

Thirdly, the social context of the Dalits, to which the text and theology brings the interplay a new understanding and creation of the context, forms a new Dalit context for theology of struggle, resistance and hope.

Fourthly, from the historical point of view, *Varna* and caste played a major role in strengthening the social and economic interests of the ruling castes and *varnas.* And caste as a religious order and philosophy nurtured *Varnashramadhama* and *Karma* and it was forcefully imposed by the Brahmanical rule. Unlike non-Indian history of evolution of societies, a special attention need to be paid to the origin of caste and its evolution from medieval to modern Indian society. An academic interest need to be shown in recording and analysing the roles of caste and Brahminical factors and their manifestations in political, economic and religious fields along with the collective experiences or the historiographies, which re-member the lived-history and lived reality of relationships and exchange of cultures in the subaltern life. Studies in Dalit history in general, caste and subcaste in particular, academic interest in the internalized and buried sources of Dalit resistance and outburst of social rage, are not yet the agenda of scholars and theologians. This is yet to catch the creativity and imagination of Dalits, Dalit communicators and theologians.

Fifthly, Dalit theology in the past, present and future is dynamic in putting forth a clear contextual theology through interacting with biblical theology which can be referred to as the contextual theology of Indian Dalit situation. Dalit theology in a way motivated people to practice and witness to God as the God of the Dalits, experiencing the Dalit church and Dalit community in the context of social rejection, untouchability and marginalization. Dalit theology also motivated Dalit theologians and communicators to make relevant and contemporary effort to creatively use folk art, music, drum and Dalit folk traditions to promote Dalit images. Dalit theology is from the lowest strata of Dalit society itself. Dalit theology challenges one's commitment for liberation and calls for faithful discipleship and practice as Jesus became a Dalit in the Dalit context: Dalit witness to Dalit realities perceived and concretely involved in the caste context.

Dalit Theology is thus a pluralist theology born out of the multiple experiences of the castes and subcastes. Dalit theologies is the product of different castes witnessing and seeking to discern and practice the presence and will of God in Christ within the caste realities. Dalit theology follows the Dalit way of discerning scriptural or theological sources, stories and the subjects within the present context of the Dalits. As Dalit theology is the theology of particular social context and liberation, first it derives its strength from the liberative understanding from Jesus event related to salvation of the oppressed humanity from the understanding of peace and justice. Secondly, biblical experience calls for obedience to follow Jesus, to be the instrument of liberation, releasing the captive in the face of oppression, where the poor, marginalized and the outcaste become subjects of God's liberation in history, to receive good news proclaimed by God. Dalit theology takes its birth from castes that are in history marginalized, peripherised, socially chained and denied of freedom and abundant life. However, their liberation and release from captivity is due according to God's promise.

Castes, Subalterns and Social Justice

Dalit theology of liberation is concerned with justice and reconciliation. Struggle for justice to Dalits means social justice. The understanding of social justice can be traced in Judeo-Christian tradition to where God's justice and gospel values merged as the accepted normative values in the realization of justice. But the irony in this caste context is that without recognizing inequality one cannot bring about justice. If one community or caste considers its caste status as just, and other castes and subcastes, consider caste stratification as unjust, then there is a major problem in perceiving justice in that particular context. It is thus a system which perpetuates inequality and injustice. And it is against the values of social justice, as it violates God's justice which speaks of equality. Denial of justice in this case also includes the Constitutional provision of Reservation to SC, ST and other lower castes. This also amounts to speaking against the legal system, advocating unequals with equals, or upper castes. In today's context, where reservation as an issue has taken roots into a popular demand of subcaste reservation and question of reservation for creamy layers of lower castes as a policy, wherein castes and sub castes which suffered before and after the reservation policy are denied of their share in social, economic, political and education opportunities reassert their lost rights where their castes suffer huge damage in the general categorization of untouchable castes, groups within broad

category not only rare voices against the very record as policy. However, the perpetrators of internal injustice within the broad category of SC reservation are benefactors.

These issues need to be analysed in the context of the broader issues of internal reservation as well as in the context of Mala-Madiga conflict in the sharing of power and resources in the church and in church related institutions. Justice to all need to be understood from the point of power, domination, exploitation, in the form of social, political, economical invasion and appreciation of the power over other caste, subcaste.

Conclusion

Dalit research and Dalit theology together have shown us the limitations as well as the urgency to meet the needs of Dalit communities. There is a great need to study and involve in the life of the castes which are oppressed. An honest co-operation and collaboration and solidarity with other marginalized castes and communities to fight against caste, communalism and global forces can make our theological journey more relevant, liberative and contextual. Along with racism, casteism is also gaining momentum in the life of uppercaste and upper class. This is so, since in the global players, along with capitalism and religious fundamentalism, casteist and Brahminical forces gained major power in restructuring financial capital and social engineering of the third world societies. Dalit theologians and researchers need to search for an alternative people-oriented voices to the culture of resistance and a new critical methodology to address the age-old exploitation of the Dalits in the modern times. But the urgency still calls for Dalit researchers and theologians to create an awareness among Dalits to raise their consciousness of resistance and struggle which brings them self-respect and dignity. This process demands the concerned to involve themselves in education, agitation and in strengthening the organisation from time to time without losing the sight of the realities of the Dalit context for liberation.

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1 James Massey, ed. *A Theology from Dalit Perspective*, CDS, p 83.

2 K.S. Singh, *The Schedule Caste, People of India Series II*, Calcutta: Oxford India Paper backs, 1999, p. 13.

3 Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, p 169.

4 George Thadathil, ed, *Subaltern Perspectives Philosophising in Context*. ATC Bangalore, 2005, p 91.

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